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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 0158
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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0127
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DUSHANBE 000877

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [TI](#) [ASEC](#)
SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - VISIT TO RASHT WARLORDS UNDERSCORES
LACK OF GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF OUTLYING REGIONS

REF: DUSHANBE 216

Classified By: AMBASSADOR TRACEY A. JACOBSON, REASONS 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In mid-June, the Embassy Regional Security Officer (RSO) traveled to the Rasht Valley to assess the security situation 4 months after a shootout between local and federal level Ministry of Interior forces (reftel). Local strongmen are not loyal to the central government, and are able and willing to violently defend their turf. While there is no immediate threat to U.S. personnel traveling in the area, Dushanbe authorities must tread carefully. End summary.

¶2. (C) June 11-15 the RSO visited the towns of Gharm, Tajikabad, Jirgatal, and Tavildara, and passed through numerous small villages and settlements in the region. Historically, the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) forces had significant forces in this area, and many former UTO commanders and fighters remain in the region. The Ministry of Interior refused to allow the RSO to meet with local Ministry officials in Gharm; the State Committee for National Security, however, granted meetings with its local officials. This was the first time the Ministry of Interior refused a meeting with the Regional Security Officer. (Note: During a May 26 visit to Gharm by Embassy security local staff doing advance preparation for a May 27-28 Ambassadorial visit, the Ministry of Interior did allow them to meet with local Ministry of Interior officials).

Fortress Rasht

¶3. (U) The road from Dushanbe to Gharm is undergoing significant improvements funded by a multi-year Asian Development Bank program. However, road improvements completed so far do not extend much beyond Rogun, site of the giant hydroelectric dam project the Government dreams of building. Much of the road is still a dirt track along steep mountainsides. The road to Gharm crosses the Surkhob river several times, and many bridges are in poor shape and could be easily demolished. If any of these bridges were to collapse, they would make driving to the Rasht Valley extremely difficult. The road is also vulnerable to rock slides, avalanches, and blockages in the winter and spring.

14. (C) In February, local Ministry of Interior officials loyal to Mirzokhuja Ahmadov, the Chief of the Ministry's Organized Crime Section in Gharm, and a former opposition commander, engaged in a shootout with an OMON detachment led by OMON's Chief, who allegedly was on a mission to arrest Ahmadov (reftel). During the shootout, the OMON Chief, Colonel Oleg Zakharchenko, was killed. At that time, RSO sources said that Ahmadov and his men knew about the OMON detachment's visit well before the OMON troops arrived in Gharm.

15. (C) On his June visit, RSO noted probable surveillance beginning at Dushanbe's eastern gate, and continuing all along the road to Gharm. People along the way would pick up their cell phones as soon as embassy vehicles passed. (Note: During the May 26 advance visit to Gharm by Embassy security local staff they met with Ahmadov, who told them that he did in fact have posts all along the road leading from Dushanbe to Gharm, and that any convoys, vehicles with darkened windows, or with government plates, were tracked and reported to him).

16. (C) The Regional Security Officer saw Ahmadov twice during his visit to Gharm, but because of the prohibition placed on him on meeting with local Interior Ministry officials, did not attempt to speak with Ahmadov. On both sightings, Ahmadov was walking on the main street in Gharm in front of his office, carrying two pistols in a pair of shoulder holsters outside his white shirt. Ahmadov was surrounded by eight plain-clothes men who appeared to be carrying concealed weapons. He had a Toyota land cruiser with curtained

windows, no license plate, and rifles lying in the back seats. While government officials have claimed that there is a criminal investigation ongoing into his actions during the February confrontation with OMON, Ahmadov continues in his function as local head of the Ministry of Interior's Office for Combating Organized Crime.

17. (C) According to multiple sources, following the shooting in February, over two hundred young people came to Gharm from throughout the Rasht Valley and asked Ahmadov to arm them against the government. Ahmadov refused and reportedly said that "now is not the time." Two sources said Ahmadov could quickly gather two to three hundred fighters if the government moved to arrest him again. RSO observed ten to fifteen openly armed men guarding Ahmadov's house.

18. (C) One local source told RSO that the February confrontation was related to a competition between two drug trafficking groups) one headed by Ahmadov and another by someone affiliated with the Ministry of Interior's Chief of Administration to Combat Organized Crime in Dushanbe. (Note: other sources told the embassy, immediately following the February incident, that the shooting stemmed from a struggle over control of coal deposits in Rasht valley.)

19. (C) Central government authorities have paid a great deal of attention to Gharm. During his five day visit, RSO observed several high level visitors, including the Deputy Prime Minister, Agriculture Minister, First Deputy Chairman of the Border Guards, the Ministry of Defense Major General in charge of Interior Quick Reaction Forces, and the Second Deputy Chairman for the State Committee for National Security. Each appeared to be in Gharm on separate visits.

The United Tajik Opposition Is Alive and Well

110. (C/NF) RSO met with Daler Ubaidulloev (Strictly Protect/NoFORN), a former opposition commander in the Kamarov Valley north of Gharm, and a close contact/source of Embassy security local staff. Following the Civil War, Ubaidulloev served briefly as a Ministry of Interior investigator in Gharm. Ubaidulloev accompanied RSO for three days of his tour of the region. Ubaidulloev is now a farmer, but

according to Embassy security local staff, he has unofficial influence in the region. At nearly every small village they passed through, RSO observed that men would approach Ubaidulloev with great deference and respect. On more than one occasion, vehicles would stop on the path and four or five men would pile out of their cars and walk a hundred meters to greet him. When introduced to RSO, some pulled AK-47s out of their vehicles and shot at rocks on the hillside to demonstrate their marksmanship, and invited RSO to shoot as well. One invited RSO to come hunting in September, "as long as we're not at war then".

¶11. (C/NF) Ubaidulloev guided RSO to a cave in the Kamarov Valley where food and ammunition were stored, and showed him multiple sites where tree branches were piled for later use to conceal equipment, weapons, or personnel. Qto conceal equipment, weapons, or personnel.

Drug Smuggling Planes and a Raid on Armory

¶12. (C/NF) While hiking in the mountains, RSO observed two different airplanes, approximately fifteen minutes apart, flying in the direction of Gharm and appearing to be landing there. When RSO asked Ubaidulloev who was flying in and out of an airport which was officially closed to fixed-wing traffic, Ubaidulloev said "drug barons." (Note: While the quality of housing drops precipitously the further away from Dushanbe one gets, in Darband, near Gharm, a new development stands in stark contrast, where large new homes on sizable plots of land are conspicuous).

¶13. (C/NF) Ubaidulloev told RSO that during the first week in June, twenty men dressed in black, wearing masks and carrying

Kalashnikov rifles stormed the Ministry of Interior office in Kamarov and seized their weapons. The men spoke Tajik with a local Gharm accent, but no one has so far claimed responsibility for the raid. This incident has not been reported in the press.

Gone to Russia

¶14. (C) RSO met with the United Nations area manager and security assistant at their office in Gharm. They said that over seventy percent of local men were working in Russia. The area manager also added that Gharm lacked electricity for 6) 7 months of the year. The United Nations is able to meet with the Ministry of Interior and State Committee for National Security without a problem, and they provided whatever assistance they could. When asked about unexploded mines, he indicated there were still many unexploded cluster bombs in the area, dropped by the Uzbek Air force during the civil war. The area manager mentioned that recently Ahmadov's men arrested a girl in Gharm for having her picture painted by a foreign artist, on the charge that this violated Islamic law. The UN area manager described this incident as very unusual.

¶15. (C) The American program manager of Mercy Corps, a U.S.-sponsored non-governmental organization doing agricultural food security programs in Gharm, told RSO that she had no security problems. She had lived in Gharm and the region for 18 months, and said she personally felt safer in Gharm than Dushanbe. She described locals opposed to the Government as quick to mobilize, but slow to act) and unlikely to act without some provocation and instigation. She sensed no hostility to foreigners in Gharm, and doubted that locals would attack a foreigner. She said locals took seriously their responsibility to protect their guests, and would be collectively offended if anything happened to a foreigner in their area. She also said there was still much positive feeling among the locals for foreigners who, during the civil war and since, helped by providing humanitarian relief when the central government did nothing.

No Threat to Dushanbe, But Dushanbe Cannot Control

¶16. (C) Comment: The Ministry of Interior's refusal of permission for the RSO to meet with local Ministry of Interior officials may have been to prevent the embarrassing spectacle of Mirzokhuja Ahmadov, himself a Ministry of Interior officer, receiving a foreign official guest while defying Tajik security forces. The Tajik Government has so far been unable to project security forces into the Gharm area to detain Ahmadov, and it is not likely that the Government will succeed in reestablishing effective control there without using large numbers of troops. However, attempting this would be easily detected in advance, and could rally an armed opposition and create a larger conflict. The volume and type of government visitors to Gharm likely reflect an attempt to collect intelligence and ascertain options to resolve the situation with Ahmadov, without inflaming the situation further. End comment. Qinflaming the situation further. End comment. JACOBSON